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ABSTRACT

Two collaborative authors have found that discussions about collaborative writing are hard to come by. Despite years of research into collaborative learning, the collaborative nature of knowledge, and many examples of collaborative work by great writers, the notion of solitary authorship is hard to overcome. These authors found that few of the recently published co-authored textbooks deal in any significant way with collaboration as a cognitive strategy. Some books emphasize that a writer may call on others for help in brainstorming, while others defer any suggestion of collaboration until the final editing stages. In general, most are inadequate on the topic. The authors' own experiences working together may be atypical but still informative. They began their collaboration as colleagues talking--or complaining--about their students' work, then devising and sharing a common syllabus, talking regularly about how their jointly-planned classes were going, and finally gathering essays and other information to use in class, which eventually formed the basis of a book. Work on their book was largely informal and, since they were neighbors, often occurred in social contexts. Their working style, to the extent that they had one, was flexible. They have learned of other collaborative writers who have faced greater difficulties, living many miles from each other or having to negotiate considerable personality differences or working styles. Their investigation into this topic also calls attention to how genre or the type of writing in question influences the possibilities for collaboration. (TB)

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Two Writers Writhing: How Do We Explain Collaboration?

(presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Washington D.C., March 22-25, 1995)

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Russ:

The difficulty of explaining collaborative writing was driven home to us rather dramatically--and comically--early in our own collaborative project when my wife tried to explain to her 92-year-old father how Sheryl and I were working together on writing a book. "What if they disagree?" he asked. "Oh, they justtalk until they work things out," my wife responded. We would have said "We negotiate our differences," but my wife's response was much more rhetorically effective for the audience. Still, her father simply could not fathom that our actual writing was fully collaborative. Finally, though, he had an epiphany: "Ah," he said thoughtfully, "I see now. Russ writes, and then Sheryl types it up." So much for the twentieth century.

Sheryl:

I guess that's just another example of the silencing of women's voices in the text. We suppose that the failure of a 92-year-old man to make sense of the collaborative nature of our venture is understandable. But we've found that it is not only well-meaning family and friends who want to know which sections of the book belong to each of us, but also colleagues. We find there is a great deal of curiosity among people we've met--both in our profession and outside of it--about how much each of us did in writing the book.

Russ:

When people ask how much of our book I wrote, I reply, quite honestly, "All of it." The inevitable follow-up, "Then what did Sheryl do?" gets the same response: "She wrote all of it, too." This joint-authorhship, which has come over a few years to seem so natural to both of us in working together, seems quite alien even to many experienced writers.

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The fact that we've had such a hard time explaining our own collaboration made us wonder how others explained it. The best place to find an answer, we thought, might be to look at collaboratively-written books themselves, to see what their writers had to say about collaboration and then talk with them about their experiences.

Sheryl:

What we discovered is that despite years of research into collaborative learning, the nature of knowledge, and many examples of collaborative work such as that done by Wordsworth and Coleridge, the notion of solitary authorship is hard to overcome, even in collaboratively-written textbooks. We found in our review that few of the recently published co-authored textbooks deal in any significant way with collaboration as a cognitive strategy to be used throughout the writing process--from invention through multiple drafting, revising, and editing. In fact, we were surprised at how few collaboratively-written texts actually valorize collaborative work.

Some books emphasize that a writer may call on others for some help in brainstorming, while others defer any suggestion of collaboration until the final editing stage. Several recent texts don't bring collaboration into play until after drafting has occurred, which suggests that writing is still viewed by many of their authors as an essentially solitary activity. Some, in fact, even warn about collaboration, one stating that showing one's writing to others is something we must "risk" doing as part of academic discourse. But all of these approaches are in collaboratively-written textbooks where, presumably, the writers talked about their ideas, worked through writing problems, negotiated differences, and revised in the larger collaborative enterprise with editors which is part of every publication process.

So if the texts themselves are collaboratively-written, how can they not deal more accurately with the complexities of collaborative writing--something which must have been driven home to the authors every day that they were working together. Do many of us believe deep down that

collaboration in the hands of our students is too close to cheating--a complaint sometimes voiced by teachers and occasionally by students themselves.

Is it, we wondered cynically, that most of us really don't believe in collaboration as much as we say we do? Are we paying lip service to the latest research trends in order to sell our books? We didn't have to talk to many collaborators before we found that most emphatically not to be the case. The writers we talked with were almost uniformly enthusiastic about their experiences, recognizing that the collaborative efforts brought out their best and that working together results in a team that is much more than the sum of its parts. Collaboration became for most of them, as it did for us, simply the best--for some, the only--way to work.

Why, then, is there a significant stress on collaboration in only a handful of recent books? A few do, of course, lay great stress on collaboration. Interestingly enough, though, about the most enthusiastic endorsement of collaborative writing we've seen occurs in a textbook with just one author. We don't know what sort of conclusion to draw from this. Perhaps, in fact, most collaborative writers tend not to stress collaboration because we believe that, as professionals who realize we need as well as crave input from respected colleagues, we can handle all of its ambiguities and difficulties, while our students really aren't yet equipped for such challenges.

Russ:

And there are certainly challenges involved, both professional and interpersonal. Talking with other collaborators, we've heard the tale of one pair of writers (unnamed to us and so nameless still) who became so angry with each other that they even refused to meet in order to finish their book. Driven only by their contract and the threat of legal action, the report goes, these two writers exchanged their manuscript by tossing it from their moving cars onto each others' driveways, like the morning paper, to avoid face-to-face confrontations. But we're glad to say that this seems to have been the exceptional collaboration rather than the rule. Still, all the collaborative teams we talked to have had to learn to work together and to make sacrifices of one kind or another. Some have given up family vacations so they'll have the opportunity to

work together during break periods or over summers. Some have had to endure 12- or 16-hour work days on those rare occasions when they could actually be together in the same city. Some have had to learn to use e-mail and buy fax machines. And nearly all have had to give up individual pride of authorship to ensure that their collaborative prose is as seamless as possible.

Sheryl:
Our review of the texts revealed that few of them concentrate at any length on collaboration, and those that do often present a sanitized view of working together. We wondered why so many collaborating writers suppress the messiness of the collaborative writing process, or rather try to contain or restrain it to a more manageable or standardized one-process-fits-all system.
Our preliminary information is interesting indeed, for it reflects a marked disjunction between how collaborative writing teams function and how they (or rather we) present collaborative writing in their texts.

Our own experience may be atypical, but still informative. We began our collaborative venture simply as two colleagues taking--complaining, if the truth must be known--about our students' work, then devising and sharing a common syllabus, then talking regularly about how our jointly-planned classes weregoing, and finally gathering essays and other information to use in class, and writing our own materials, which eventually formed the basis of our book. Since we were also neighbors, working together was convenient, and collegiality and neighborliness led to a close friendship as well. A brief chat over coffee, a bike ride or even an evening of dinner and videos with our families would often easily shift into a discussion of the book and one if its many attendant problems--whether a conceptual problem or just an unruly sentence, and then easily veer back into a social occasion once more. Our working style--to the extent that we had one--was extremely flexible. There was a great deal of talking and laughing, and in the midst of that a book took shape. No one was consciously responsible for any one part; we were each responsible for the whole project. We each acted as muse at one time or another, suffered writer's block individually and together, and served as sounding board, writer, reader, editor, critic, conscience, or whatever was needed to keep us going at the moment.

As a result, we've found in rereading our own work that we often have no discrete memory of one or the other of us having written any particular section. Most of it, in fact, seems to have sprung fully blown, but from whose forehead, we just can't remember. And our friends and families say that the voice in the text is neither of ours; it is, rather, a voice we can both summon at will when we work together on a project. But this is not often the case for other collaborative teams we've talked with. Almost everyone was deeply concerned that the voice of the text not shift, and nearly all expressed relief that early reviewers of their work were not able to tell one voice from the other.

Russ:
Ours is a voice, though, that in the past year has become disembodied as our collaborative working style has, of necessity, changed greatly. When we started, we rode to work together every day, had adjoining offices, saw each other for most of the working hours of the day, and, since we lived only a mile apart and got along, socialized on weekends as well. Half way through our project, Sheryl moved to another school, but commuted, so we could still work directly together on weekends. But then I moved too, and now we work at different schools, live 700 miles apart, and talk for 15 minutes a week at most. The working relationship we had built on a foundation of informal and almost constant talking and easy proximity, has changed dramatically, and we finished our project by fax, e-mail, and overnight delivery. The Fed-Ex drivers know us both by name.

Our presentation of collaboration in our textbook is built on a foundation of talking through all parts of the writing process and negotiating differences face to face--perhaps because that was our experience with collaboration. How our presentation would have varied had our experience been at the remove is now very much on our minds as we start another project together. But we certainly haven't had the greatest difficulty we've heard of. Most collaborators we talked with are, in fact, colleagues at the same school. But even that has not meant for many that they can work together as constantly and easily as we did.

In some cases, we were told, writing during school hours was held to a minimum since both writers had too many other commitments. With at least one collaborative team, being colleagues and neighbors still didn't allow for the kind of pervasiveness our collaboration took on. These writers set aside time during breaks and summer vacations to work together, leaving the rest of their time free for other professional and personal activities. Another team shared our experience with increasing separation--but with a vengeance. For their first book they were at the same school, then on opposite sides of the state, but since that state was Texas, they were 700 miles apart. With their latest project, though, they're on opposite sides of the world, one in Japan, the other in Texas. They've wondered if their next book will require interplanetary communication.

But phone and fax and e-mail (and the Fed-Ex driver) can help overcome distance. Personality, though, is quite another matter. Having looked at research into personality typing and its effect on composing styles, we surmised that negotiating differences among personalities is an important component of effective collaborations, as it was for us. In fact, there was an interesting unanimity again, with most of the writers we talked with insisting on the value of complementing their partner's personality and working style.

Sheryl:
"My collaborator is a self-starter," one of them said to us, "while I'm persistent. She gets us started and I keep us going." Another noted that his partner is efficient and moves quickly, while he himself is slower to start but more methodical. Still another team has one member who always sees the big picture, while the other prefers a micro-view and can thus ensure that every detail is taken care of.

Another very successful and prolific team brought home to us just how very different collaborating writers can be and still do a good job. Their difference is perhaps best suggested by the cars they bought with their royalities: one purchased a sturdy Volvo while the other picked up a fast, bright red sports car. Rather than our pattern--or more accurately non-pattern--of working together

in fits and starts, they tend to set formal appointments to work together on pre-designated tasks. And unlike all the others we talked with, they don't much concern themselves with maintaining a single voice in their writing. In fact, they say that many people, whether professionals in the discipline or not, can tell who has written what portions of their books and can discern their individual voices in the text. In the beginning they talked at great length about their ideas and wrote, revised, and edited in a less systematic fashion, much like our own, but after many years of working together, they now tend to divide up the revision work for successive editions. And when they speak of collaboration in their books, they tend to deal directly with its complexities rather than suppressing them. Theirs is not a sanitized collaboration.

One member of this team suggested that effective collaboration is dependent not only upon negotiating differences in personality composing styles, but also upon the nature of the task itself. This writer compared her ways of collaborating on a composition text with a collaboration on an anthology with her spouse, where despite the emotional closeness and physical proximity, they both work in isolation in their studies, then leave the work for the other to see privately before they discuss it. As far as their collaboration is concerned, they might as well be hundreds of miles apart. Such work in isolation is easier, perhaps more possible, for an anthology or even a handbook, where sections are discrete, self contained, than it is for a rhetoric, where each section must fit seamlessly with those around it.

Part of where all this led us is to wondering whether we should be examining how the nature of collaboration changes depending upon the genre we are working in. None of the composition texts we examined--not even our own--considers this point, though several stress collaboration mainly in research projects, where evidence gathering is a team effort, even if the rest of the writing process is individual.

Russ:
In some ways this brings us back to where we started. Why don't we all spend more time dealing with collaboration across the writing process rather than just at the invention or editing stages?

Why don't we try to get our students to actually write together. Part of the answer, of course, is that we were all trained in doing individual work, and that mold is hard to break, or at least hard to dismiss even when we are working collaboratively. Our graduate training certainly did little to prepare us for collaborative writing; indeed, more often than not graduate students have been traditionally pitted against each other. We've all heard--or experienced--horror stories about graduate students who hide sources from each other rather than sharing them eagerly and openly. Few of us in the humanities ever had an opportunity to work collaboratively in graduate school, and until recently, we tended to look upon the collaborative work of physicists or sociologists with considerable suspicion. Indeed, some of our colleagues still do.

Perhaps more important, though, we all seem intuitively to understand that a good collaborator is hard to find. One of the things we've been struck by in talking with other collaborative teams is that no matter how much their working style may differ from our own, the issue of complementing each other arises every time.

Sheryl:
Many of us agree that our students can benefit from collaborative work, and the research suggests that those who can do so are far more likely to succeed at writing in their professions. But if our students are actually to write together, not just read and comment on each others' drafts or help each other with final editing, then we need to help them ensure that they, too, will complement each other. And it may well be that a 16 week semester, worse yet a 10-week quarter, is just not enough time to do that. Perhaps the best we can hope for is a bit of joint brainstorming, some peer review of initial drafts, and giving a hand with final editing. Our students, after all, do not share our confidence in our own work and are not ready to submit to the greater good of a collaborative team; they have too much to learn and too much to lose at this early stage. Perhaps we cannot, in fact, really produce collaborative writers in our composition classrooms. But we can at least continue to show our students that working together is a way of further improving our writing skills.